



Emerging from the Margins

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Emerging from the Margins

Stephanie Conn

**Supervised by: Dr. Kathleen McCracken
& Dr Frank Sewell**

In my PhD by Practice 'Emerging from the Margins: The Poetry of Chronic Illness' I aim to demonstrate that poetry's stylistic range and formal properties make it a medium, well suited to expressing the experience of chronic illness. The book-length poetry collection will be informed by my own chronic condition. The generated poems will reflect on this lived experience, including onset, investigations, diagnosis and long-term management and will consider physical implications as well as the emotional impact. They will take account of the perceptions of others, particularly in relation to invisible conditions, including notions of madness. To add further depth and perspective to the collection, I will consider how other artists and public figures, such as Frida Kahlo, Florence Nightingale and Otto Kamensek, have responded, in their lives and work, to living with chronic illness.

This creative component will sit alongside a critical examination of contemporary British and Irish poetry of chronic illness.

Carroting

The hatter told me how he treated beaver skins
with a solution of mercury that turned
the skin-edge orange when it was oven-dried.
He said he stretched the pelt to cut thin shreds
blew the fur into a cone-shaped colander
added water, passed it through the wet roller
that caused the fur to felt, then peeled free
the loose hood ready to be dyed and blocked.

For a city-girl who shuffled papers on a walnut desk
his story sparkled amber and when we met
in the bar that cold first night, he was not mad.
When he shook my hand, his fingers didn't shake
there was no limpness in the wrist and his eyes
met mine without a blink – but the signs were there
in my own erratic heartbeat, in the almost smile
and lodged beneath my nails as gold.

Pigment

Black squirrel, bolshy
on top of a carpark bin –
downtown Toronto.

My city-slicker
cousin tuts – dirty rodent –
as I take a snap.

Are you mad? Why
would you photograph that?
She cannot believe

it's my first glance at its kind
and no, she doesn't know why
they are black, or here.

I do my research;
learn that it is a mutant –
a quirk of DNA;

exactly the same
species as the common grey.
The pigment gene fails –

a single hormone
turns the colour switch to off –
jet black hair grows thick,

conserves the heat,
toughens them up
to tolerate bitter cold.

Active and outdoors
the whole iced winter
long, they thrive,

scamper in backyards,
city-parks, hang out in stripped
trees and parking lots.

I'm the intruder,
shivering in fur-lined boots,
layers stuffed with down.

At night I stretch, turn,
ache, try hard to visualise
a knotted nucleotide.

Dizzy Spell

To momentarily lose your balance
on the way to the bathroom late at night
is not that unusual, still drunk on sleep
staggering naked along the landing
the walls close enough to keep you upright,

and headaches are common, though they throb
drowning drum beats in your skull, make teeth ache.

If I close my eyes in a blacked-out room
keep my weighted body flat, head sunk
in a breath-stale pillow, this too will pass.
If I swallow the small yellow pill four-hourly
ignore the strange sensations smarting in my skin

and wait, step from the bed after a week –
I will not crumple to the floor, all feeling gone.